

REVIEW: SCOTLAND RESURGENT

Tom Hubbard

Paul Henderson Scott, **Scotland Resurgent: Comments on the Cultural and Political Revival of Scotland**, Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 2003, 351 pages, pb, £9.99, ISBN 0-854110-83-6.

Paul Scott seems an unlikely rebel. Now in his eighties, he was for much of his working life a professional diplomat and in the employ of that British unitary state which he wishes to dismember. He is a companionable, clubbable man whom one cannot imagine capable of uttering a word in anger. In many ways he is a latter-day version of the eighteenth-century Edinburgh luminaries who make frequent appearances in the graceful, lucid papers collected in this book.

Yet in the pantheon of Boswell, Hume, Adam Smith and their successors such as Walter Scott, PHS reveals intriguing ambiguities. These men, who accepted the Treaty of Union (or at least its careerist possibilities), remained stubbornly native and were moved to protest against the erosion of Scottish identity. The very decorousness of their – and Paul Scott's – statements makes their critiques of the status quo all the more devastating. Do not be deceived by Paul Scott's courtesy to sympathisers and opponents alike: he knows when to pounce.

He is a scholar rather than an academic, in the popularising, generalist mode of Patrick Geddes who, fittingly, is much invoked here – as is George Davie, the philosopher of the democratic intellect. There is nothing frostily professorial or ambiguous about PHS's commitment to the SNP, of which he has been the kenspeckle spokesman for the arts. The book's publication schedule would doubtless have denied us his response to the 2003 Scottish

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Parliamentary elections, which did not favour the SNP. At least for the time being, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Greens are more charismatically associated with the radical, refusenik tendency.

Paul Scott was a key figure when Scottish nationalism – and the SNP in particular – was at pains to resist a ‘little Scotlander’ image and to demonstrate that it was more *internationalist* than the lofty parishioners of the London-directed parties. An admirer of Slovenia, one of the newly independent states of the early 1990s, PHS distinguishes the small-is-beautiful nationalism of emerging countries from the bloody tribalism elsewhere in the south-Slav region.

Scott’s internationalism infuses what amounts to an alternative history of Scottish literature – indeed, I would be strongly tempted to add this collection to a booklist for new students of the subject. He quotes Hume on each nation’s ‘peculiar set of manners’; to me, Hume’s essay belongs to a sturdy sub-tradition, from Michael Scot (c.1175-c.1235) and John Barclay (1582-1621) onward, of Scottish comment on the diversity of European peoples. PHS’s namesake, Sir Walter, is praised for the part he played in awakening other countries’ awareness of their cultural identities. At the same time he does not soft-pedal the anti-democratic paternalism of the Wizard of the North (whom Mark Twain blamed as the source of legitimacy for much that was obnoxious about the American South).

Scots, our language most cherished and despised (often simultaneously), is accorded the dignity it deserves in PHS’s casually robust declaration that it was the register ‘in which some of the finest poetry of mediaeval Europe had been written’. His celebration of Scottish literary endeavour through the centuries lends authority – as if it were needed (it seems to be) – to his swipes at those pundits, as parochial temporally as they are spatially, who breathlessly inform us that Scot.Lit. is the new cool and began only twenty years ago.

Against lazy assumptions that nineteenth-century Scotland equals unalleviated mediocrity, Paul Scott calmly homes in on the constellation of James Clerk Maxwell, Patrick Geddes, Robert Louis Stevenson, William MacTaggart et al; he reminds us, too, of William Donaldson’s sterling efforts in collating the gutsy realism of Aberdeenshire writers such as William Alexander, much of whose fiction had been serialised (and accordingly interred) in local newspapers. I declare an interest: my peripatetic course on

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'Topics in Scottish Literature and Culture 1871-1914', which I first presented at Grenoble University, is designed to show that there is much more to this period than the kailyard, especially when one includes Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the attendant surge of Glasgow-based visual energy, not to mention composers like Hamish MacCunn who contributed to 'the recovery of national self-confidence' (PHS) during the 1880s and 1890s.

Paul Scott strikes off phrases that set you off on your own elaborations: for example, his characterisation of RLS as 'a Presbyterian Bohemian' had me pondering on that capital B: Stevenson's Prince Florizel, in 'The Suicide Club', is the elegant sovereign of the central-European state, not some manky garret-haunter. Cheroot-puffing Florizel is not as laid-back as he appears; reminded of his status, he becomes stern, didactic. That's RLS himself, surely: churchy camp. Again, PHS is good for the students because he sums up key concepts in a few tart lines: 'The romantic movement in Europe, which dominated taste for the best part of a century, responded enthusiastically to the work of three Scots, Macpherson, Scott and Byron. Ironically enough, none of these men was predominantly romantic in the nineteenth century sense of the term.'

If today's cultural campaigns have moved beyond the concerns of Paul Scott's generation (and political party), that is due in no small measure to their role as pioneers. It was PHS who initiated dialogues with Catalan intellectuals long before it became *de rigueur* to employ Catalan architects. Eilidh Bateman, a young sociolinguist, will soon publish her research on the comparative status of the Scots and Catalan languages; it was commissioned by the Scots Language Society, one of the many bodies indebted to Paul Scott's committee service. It is arguable that the *raison d'être* of Ms Bateman's project can be traced back to the early campaigns of PHS and his contemporaries.

His optimism, remarkably, is undiminished. Here there is no Cowdenbeath on a wet Monday morning. A party-pooper like me would feel duty-bound to girm at the current chirpiness of Edinbro-Glasgow intellectuals: PHS, however, has known the reality of official frustration of his efforts, the delaying tactics of endless feasibility studies. In the words of Ian W. King's miner, off to fight Franco: 'If ye're gonnae dae a thing jist up and dae it.' PHS is a doer, but much of his formidable energy has been side-lined. That has not necessarily been his fault. He felt obliged to enter the stushie over whether to site a new national gallery in Edinburgh or Glasgow; that there was such a stushie in the first place says more about Scotland than about

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PHS. In Poland the national gallery system is devolved: Lodz houses the contemporary art collection, Poznan the Polish Symbolists, Wroclaw the art of World War 2. There you go: a two-line feasibility study tucked away at the end of a book review.

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